WORRYING ABOUT GOD

July 20, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"'Martha, Martha,' he said, 'you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one.'" --Luke 10:42 (The Jerusalem Bible)

Scripture
Luke 10:38-42

Last Sunday afternoon at about 4:30, just as the Chicago Air and Water Show was ending, I got into my automobile to drive north on Michigan Avenue onto Lake Shore Drive. In the next thirty minutes I managed to proceed about four hundred yards. Once I had made my imprudent decision and committed myself to the turn onto Michigan Avenue, I ran out of other alternatives. There was no turning off and no turning back. Ahead of me was traffic, standing still with what looked like an invading army of people on foot, bicycles, mopeds, pushing baby carriages, charcoal grills, carrying blankets, coolers and radios, weaving through the cars from the lake side toward home. There was absolutely nothing to be done but sit and wait... What saved me from despair at that moment was the memory of a friend of mine, a clinical psychologist who was very popular on the Stress Management Workshop Circuit, and used to employ very effectively the illustration of a traffic jam to teach about the source of stress and how to cope with it. A traffic jam is a kind of ultimate stress producer. He was, on the side, a consultant with a metropolitan police department, and was very helpful to hundreds of police officers and their families, by teaching about that marvelous internal dynamic called the "fight/flight" response. The fight/flight syndrome is what equips us biologically to deal with immediate life threatening crises. Blood pressure increases, pupils dilate, hair stands on end, digestion stops, muscles flex - ready for instant fight/flight. Urban police officers, my friend discovered, because of the demands placed on them from traffic accidents to domestic squabbles, undergo a series of fight/flight responses all day long with virtually no opportunity for the body to return to its normal state. And a traffic jam, he used to tell his nervously chuckling audiences, does the same thing to hard-driving, aggressive, Type-A, business persons. It's called stress, and it has to do with the loss of control. It is the height of folly, my friend said, to expect a man or woman who has been in that situation for 30 or 60 minutes on the way home from work, to come through the door and sit down to a cheerful and affirming family dinner. Biologically, what the stressed person is ready to do is fight or flee - which is exactly what happens all too frequently.

If memory serves me correctly my friend was far better at diagnosing than prescribing, although he used to say that to understand is part of the solution. But he did tell many professional groups that worrying about the things over which they had no control was a major and essentially

unnecessary source of stress in life.

The first premise of this sermon is that each of us, at different levels to be sure, knows what it feels like not to be in control: from traffic jams on Lake Shore Drive, to our own life - buffeted and pushed and pulled by outside forces, to the grand sweep of history which seems to be careening toward some apocalyptic disaster, we know the feeling.

The second premise is that we worry a lot: that one of the things we do best is worry; that some of us have become expert, professional worriers about all sorts of things - money, health, our children's grades, our investments; and that underneath all the surface worrying is one major, truly theological worry.

The third premise is that one of the ways Western men and women deal with loss of control and worry - is busyness, scurrying about from activity to activity, slightly breathless, always a little behind. Loss of control...worry...busyness.

The text for this sermon comes from a favorite Bible story. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He stopped outside the city at the home of his good friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus. In Luke's account of it, Martha is the host. She "worried about much serving," Luke tells us which means, I suppose, that she had been at it all day, dusting the shelves, arranging the pots and pans. She had plumped the pillows, cut fresh flowers, sent for good wine and a special cut of meat, and had put on nicer-than-ordinary Tuesday night clothes. It means, I suppose, that she did the welcome with the little speech she had been rehearsing all day so it would sound spontaneous and gracious. And she showed him where he would sleep and where this was and that was, and as soon as all was in place and she had managed a comfortable conversation group with her sister Mary and her brother Lazarus on either side of Jesus, she excused herself for a few moments to continue with the meal.

Here and now I want to say "Hurrah" for Martha. Tradition may make Mary the heroine of this vignette but Martha's the one I'd want to visit. She-or-he-is the person you simply must have on the committee if you want to accomplish anything. I love the worriers of this world. They are the ones who prepare, who cover the details, who think about possible outcomes and are ready. May their number increase! They chop the wood for tomorrow's fire today. They get the roast out of the freezer, make motel reservations and while the rest of us are solving the problems of the world they're making sure the glasses are full. While some of us are futurizing about possible alternative mission directions for the church, they are raising money to pay the fuel bill. God bless them.

I identify so much with Martha in this story that I can barely believe what happens next. She complained to Jesus that her sister Mary, who had been sitting there listening to him, wasn't pulling her weight in the kitchen. It was 2,000 years ago and Lazarus didn't have to do kitchen work. Today she would complain about him too. Now let me bring in a little ambiguity at this point. Martha has suffered a bad press for her complaint. When this story is told Martha is portrayed as grouchy, unpleasant, impatient. Mary is the model of Christian serenity, the first contemplative. A recent

study of Women Around Jesus suggests that a patriarchal church favored Mary's submissiveness and was offended by Martha's assertive pushiness. Martha, after all, has no hymns, few churches named for her. Mary is the favorite. Let me suggest, however, that Martha is the more important person in this story. There is another Martha story, in John, when Lazarus has died and Jesus has not shown up and Mary is falling on the ground weeping, and Martha marches out to meet him when he finally comes and scolds him for being late and for her assertiveness is the one to hear those sublime words "I am the resurrection and the life," and consequently becomes - with Simon Peter - the only ones to confess Jesus Christ as Lord before his crucifixion. Martha's assertiveness is admirable. That is a topic for another day, but see her please as the person in this story who is most like us and whose activism and impatience has precipitated a wonderful crisis: "'Martha, Martha,' he said, 'you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one.'"

The culture in which we live is infatuated with busyness, sets up busyness as the model of the productive life. A television commercial for a local bank tells us that it's executives are obsessive, compulsive workers, worriers, who don't have time for leisure, graciousness, relaxation. Relentless activity is a product of high-technology which on the one hand has simplified a thousand daily functions by way of machines to wash our clothes, transport us to and fro, process our words and puree our vegetables while on the other hand convincing us that we are missing something if we are not actively doing things. It was James Thurber, I think, who said about our compulsive activity: "For God's sake, don't just do something, STAND THERE!"

Beneath the surface of our silly behavior is a value system that is not at all amusing. It is deadly serious and sometimes plain deadly. Its primary assertion is that the value of a human being is predicated on doing rather than being. Who a person is, and the value he or she has, depends on function. "What do you do?" we ask one another when what we really mean is "tell me who you are." Personal worth is predicated on production: doing, acting, working. In behavioral terms it means keeping busy: busy at work, busy at play, busy at leisure, busy worrying all the time.

Professional people are particularly vulnerable. Without a whistle to begin and end the day, a clock to punch, or pieces to count, some professional people don't know how to stop working. Clergy can be neurotic about it. Homemakers can work eighteen hours a day and worry the other six because there isn't enough time, ever, to get it all done and personal worth depends on keeping busy.

Perhaps Jesus saw that in Martha. Perhaps Martha had pinned her value, her sense of herself, her salvation ultimately, on keeping busy; on getting the meal on the table on time and hot. It didn't work for her, of course. It never does. There is a mounting body of evidence that compulsive worry and hyper-activity are major health hazards. Dr. Herbert Benson, a Professor at Harvard Medical School, contends that we are in the midst of a hypertension epidemic and that we are killing ourselves with stress. He writes: "Whatever it may be - the daily commute, or the rising cost of

living or the noise and fumes of the city, or random violence - (or the threat of nuclear war) - we find it difficult to reach a satisfactory equilibrium, and as a result become the victims of stress." [The Relaxation Response, p.17] Benson concludes that the unprecedented rise in heart disease is related to worry and stress and he, and others, have assembled impressive data to support the argument.

"Martha, Martha...you are killing yourself with worry. You are denying your own life." Religion ought to be the answer to this thing. Religious faith ought to help us sort out those things in life over which we have no control and ought to help us release our tight grip and turn over to God our destiny and welfare. Unfortunately, religion frequently reflects culture. In our concern to follow Jesus and work for God's Kingdom, some of us become obsessively busy. A gentle, elderly seminary professor used to warn his students about losing their own souls working for the Kingdom.

Dutch Roman Catholic Henri Nouwen reminds us that the Christian adventure begins with our personal relationship with God, and that if we want that relationship to be, to grow, to take hold, we must learn the discipline of silent inactivity. Nouwen muses that Americans try to stage-manage their encounters with God. His advice is simple: stop doing and be. Stop talking and listen. Stop serving dinner and sit at the feet of the Master. Stop praying as if you were holding a seminar. I am intrigued with Nouwen's definition - "Prayer is not a way of being busy with God. In fact, it unmasks the illusion of busyness, usefulness and indispensability. Prayer is a way of being empty and useless in the presence of God." [The Living Reminder, p. 51]

There come to all of us occasions when, before we can speak or act, we must be. There come to all of us occasions when instead of saying or doing something our love is better expressed in our presence. What can you say to the parent of a dying child? What can you do for a friend facing the valley of the shadow of death? There is nothing you can say; nothing you should do. Bible verses and bouquets of flowers may be appropriate, but all you can and must bring is yourself, your being, your presence. What is required is not words, deeds, but being: holding a hand, a strong embrace, patting an arm. Strength and love and power are communicated, appropriated, not by polished phrases or extravagant gifts, but by being. There - spiritually - are occasions when we need to relinquish control, cease the activity, the endless talk, even the prayer talk, and simply be - in God's presence. There is a time to put down the plates and cups, the briefcase, the stethoscope, the legal pad, the shovel, the car keys, the calendar - and sit at the feet of Jesus Christ and listen.

The premise here is that it is all related. All the busy worrying, all the stress, and the resultant burn-out, is related to an ultimate worry, the one final concern which truly will not respond to worry or busyness.

"There is one thing, Martha"..."What we really need, what we cry for, is something worthy and able to possess us, really possess us," Professor John Knox wrote. [I.B. Vol. 8, p. 198]

"My soul longs, yea faints
for the courts of the Lord..."
the Psalmist put it,
"My heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God."

84 year old Anglican Bishop Stephen Neil said recently: "Stress is a polite word for worry and worry is a polite word for fear."

The one thing we need is something or someone to deliver us from worrying ourselves to death. What we need is deliverance from the ageless process of trying to deny the fact that we are not in control, ultimately, of our own destiny; deliverance from the necessity of trying to establish control, and make it all secure by banking our money, our memories, experiences, sexual conquests, business success and personal victories... The one thing we need is someone to save us from the destructive, demonic and never-ending task of justifying ourselves, proving our own worth.

The old theologians called that "salvation by works," and they knew that it is not only the source of a lot of unhappiness between God and his people, it is also a very unhappy and frustration way to try to live. What we really need is to hear some Good News; namely, that we are saved by grace; that we can stop worrying about God because he is concerned about us, that we can stop worrying and turn over to God the responsibility for our ultimate welfare and destiny.

Martha - and we need desperately to hear that Good News and to believe it.

This prayer has been attributed to Saint Francis of Assissi, but in the form in which we know it, it was written by American Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1943.

"God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."

Ten years later, as a post script, Niebuhr, a hard driving compulsive worker, also wrote -

"Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore we are saved by love." [Justice and Mercy, Ursula M. Niebuhr, frontispiece]

That is the Good News. We are saved not by our accomplishments: not by frantic activity: not be keeping busy - but by love. God's love. And there is nothing to worry about...ultimately. Amen.

God of grace, we are grateful for the freedom we are given in your love. Give us courage to embrace it, strength to turn over to you control of our lives, and faith to trust your son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.